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Three Versions of Crow Omens

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Article abstract

This paper examines three versions of crow omens composed in Sanskrit verses of anuṣṭubh metre from two different sources, one Brahmanic, Gārgīyajyotiṣa, and the other Buddhist, Śārdūlakarṇāvadana. Their similarities in language and content leave little doubt that they had a common source that was probably located in the northwest of the Indian sub-continent sometime around the beginning of the Common Era.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I focus on the following three versions of crow-omen verses: the Buddhist *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* (Śkā), *vāyasaruta*, and two parts of the Brahmanic *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*: Aṅga 19, *vāyasavidyā*, and Aṅga 42.7–29, *vāyasaruta*. The aim is to identify similarities in both language and content between these three separate collections. If they prove sufficiently alike in vocabulary, syntax, grammar, and overall logic, we can safely say that they shared a common basis of knowledge, transmitted in a language not dissimilar from that of the Buddhist *Sārdūlarkarṇāvadāna*, composed in what is known as Buddhist Sanskrit. We begin with an examination of the sources for three sets of verses.

2 SOURCES

ŚĀRDŪLAKARṆĀVADANA

The ŚĀRDŪLAKARṆĀVADĀNA is the thirty-third book in the collection of Buddhist legends called the *Divyāvidāna* that was likely redacted from stories in the *Mūlasarvāstivāda Vinaya* and compiled in the first or second century CE in the northwest region of the Indian subcontinent.[1] A unique feature of this collection is its presentation of an early form of the knowledge system of Jyotiḥśāstra or Astral Science that focuses on divination through astrology. Sometime after 864 CE, the text underwent further redaction, when sections were added that dealt with other types of divination that included, among others, palmistry (*pāṇilekhā*), physiognomy (*kanyālakṣaṇa*), and oneiromancy (*svapnādhyāya*).[2] It is in this later part that the three collections of animal omens are found.

1 Schopen (2004: 573), and Skilton (2004: 747).

2 Pingree 1981: 68–69; Zysk 2016: 1: 76. A recent study of the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* based on fragments from an early Central Asian manuscript indicates that even in the earlier parts of the text, there is considerable difference between the Central Asian fragments and the later, more embellished, manu-

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Even though the three sets of animal omens entered the text late, reference to them occurs in the earliest part of the text translated into Chinese at around 250 CE.[3] In the account of the Caṇḍāla king Triśaṅku's tradition subjects of learning (*vidyā*), animal divination is mentioned as part of the king's curriculum. They included omens from the [howl of the] jackal (*śivā*) and bird omens (*śakuna*).[4] The former appears as a separate section at the end of the book, while that latter are represented by "the call of the crow" (*vāyasaruta*) and the "knowledge of the wagtail" (*khañjarīṭakajñāna*), also found at the end.[5] Since the account of the king's education dates from before the third century CE, based on the Chinese translations, it is possible that a divinatory knowledge system that include animal omens existed at least from the third century, specific examples of which were added before the ninth century during a later redaction of the text. It is reasonable to assume that the collection of crow omens found in the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* belongs to a period no early than the ninth century, but reflects a tradition that goes back before the third century, when animal and especially bird divination was part of a monarch's courtly life, which was preserved in some detail over the course of time in a Buddhist legend.

GĀRGĪYAJYOTIṢA

The GĀRGĪYAJYOTIṢA is the earliest extant collection of Brahmanic Astral Science, compiled by a certain Garga probably in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent around the beginning of the Common Era.[6] Its importance for the history of Indian science was already noticed by Pingree.[7] Except for a few studies, the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* has drawn little attention from students and scholars of ancient Indian science for obvious reasons. It occurs in the form of pothi-style paper manuscripts, whose earliest witnesses were copied no later than the first part of the nineteenth century. Small groups of scholars are just now beginning to study this important work, but it is far from being completely understood. An on-going edition, translation, and study of it is underway by a team headed by R.

scripts from Nepal that served as the basis of the 1954 edition by Mukhyopadhyaya (Śkā) (Miyazaki et al. 2015). This would seem to suggest that the text underwent significant redaction over the course of its transmission as both a part of the *Divyāvadāna* and an independent treatise, as found in some versions from Nepal .

3 Pingree 1981: 69.

4 Mukhyopadhyaya (Śkā: 31).

5 Elsewhere in Buddhist Sanskrit literature, the *Lalitavistara* (c. fourth century CE) enumerates eighty-six arts (*kalā*), where number fifty is called *śakuniruta* or "the call of the omen birds" (Vaidya 1958: 208; Venkatasubbiah 1911: 22). The knowledge of birds (*sauṇa-jāṇa*, Skt *śakuna-jñāna*) is number eighteen in the list of 72 arts (*kalā*) mentioned in Uddyotana Sūri's eighth-century *Kuvalayamāla* (Upadhye 1959–70: 1, 22, line 2).

6 Zysk 2016: 1, 56, 63–64.

7 Pingree 1981: 69–75.

N. Iyengar at the Centre for Ancient History and Culture, Jain University, Bangalore, and published in *Tattvadīpaḥ*.[8] Another study-group, spearheaded by Bill Mak, is now taking shape and beginning to publish its work in the journal *History of Science in South Asia*.[9]

The *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* was composed in a language that is neither Sanskrit nor Prakrit but a blending of both. In his edition and translation of *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*, Aṅga 41, "Yuga Purāṇa," John Mitchiner found that the language of this chapter was not classical Sanskrit and showed definite signs of being "influenced by Prakrit or hybrid Sanskrit forms" .[10] Likewise, in my study of Aṅga 48 on "the marks of men and women," based on the variants found in the different witnesses, I described the text as being composed in a language on its way to becoming Sanskrit.[11] As I hope to show in this paper, it definitely bears similarities to the Buddhist Sanskrit from the northwest of the Indian subcontinent at the beginning of the Common Era.[12]

The two versions of crow omens from the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* come from 1) a separate chapter of seventy verses (Aṅga 19) devoted exclusively to the crow as the omen bird *par excellence*, called "the knowledge of the crow" (*vāyasavidyā*); and 2) a section of twenty-two verses, bearing the internal colophon, "the call of the crow" (*vāyasaruta*) in the chapter of 116 verses (Aṅga 42) on "the calls of all beings" (*sarvabhūtaruta*). The two separate collections of crow omens, although not identical, share important common characteristics.

We begin our study with an examination of the language of the three versions and proceed with an investigation of specific examples of verses similar language, content, and logic.

3 COMMON LINGUISTIC FEATURES

This section contains a summary of a textual study of the three versions. For a detailed analysis of the language of all three versions, the reader is referred to my forthcoming publications.[13]

All three sets of omens pertain to the same bird, "crow," (*vāyasa*). Moreover, they are composed in *anuṣṭubh* metre and use a protasis-apodosis syntactical structure.

All three have the same verbal roots and forms. The principal verb of the protasis is the Prakrit verb-form of √*vās* (for the Sanskrit √*vāś*), "to call out," "to cry out;" and the principal roots of apodosis are forms of √*diś*, "to show,"

8 Iyengar et al. (Garga).
9 Geslani et al. 2017.
10 Mitchiner 1986: 33.
11 Zysk 2016: 2, 469–480.
12 Brough 1954: v. See also Cowell and Neill 1886: vi–viii.
13 Zysk (2023) and Zysk (in preparation).

"to indicate," and of √*vid*, "to know." Likewise, the three versions use irregular gerund forms that include either *-tvā* with *upasarga* or *-ya* without *upasarga*.

The specialised terminology used in both the protases and apodoses is the same in all three versions. Common to all three protases are the following words of location: *kṣīra* (trees with milky sap) and *śuṣka* (trees that are withered), as well as *śīrṣa* and *mūrdhan* (the human head). Likewise, the bird's behaviour of flapping wings occurs as an inauspicious characteristic in all three texts. It is expressed variously as *pakṣau vitatya* and *dhunvan pakṣau* in Aṅga 19; *vistīrṇapakṣa* and *pakṣeṇa pracayan* in Aṅga 42; and *pakṣaṃ vidhūyamāna* and *pakṣau vidhanvan* in the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*.

Two sets of terms are used to express direction in the protasis. One is found in all three versions and used when the observer is mobile: *dakṣiṇa* (right), *vāma* (left), *puras* and *agra* (front), and *pṛṣṭha* (back). The other is specific to *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* and Aṅga 19 and used when the observer is in a fixed position. They make up the cardinal and ordinal directions, usually beginning in the east and moving clockwise: *pūrva, aindra* (east); *purastād dakṣiṇa, purastād pūrva, āgneya* (southeast); *dakṣiṇa, yāmya* (south); *nirṛta* (southwest); *paścima, vāruṇī* (west); *paścimottara, uttarapaścima, vāyu* (northwest); *uttara, saumya* (north); and *uttarapūrva, pūrvottara, raudra* (northeast).

The common words in the apodoses are *artha* (objective, outcome, or wealth) and *anna, bhojya, bhakṣa* (food) as auspicious results, and *bhaya* (fear) as an inauspicious result.

More specifically, *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* and Garga's Aṅga 19 have the following in common. In the protasis, they share the words like *phala* (fruiting tree), *kāṣṭha* (stick), and *maṇḍala* (circle), as well as the √*hṛ*+*vyā*, "to utter," "to call," and √*grah*, "to seize," "to grasp." They both mention the same alchemical substances "lac, turmeric, or red Indian madder" (*lākṣāharidrāmañjiṣṭha*); and they have in common the activity of nest (*nīḍa*) building, expressed as giving birth (√*sū*) in the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*. Finally, both refer to *bali* (oblations) given to crows. In the apodosis, the two share forms of √*vid* and √*jñā*, "to know;" and their common auspicious results are *svarṇa, suvarṇa* (gold) and *vārṣa, vṛṣṭi* (rain).

Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna and Garga's Aṅga 42 share the following: the auspicious apodosis, *arthasiddhi* (attainment of objective or wealth); the inauspicious apodosis, *yodha, yuddha* (battle and war); and the use of √*bhū*, "to be," and forms of √*khyā*, "to relate," "tell."

Finally, Garga Aṅga 19 and 42 share words for *valīka* (thatched root) and the bodies of the water, *udapāna* (well), *saras* (lake), and *saritā* (river) in the protasis; and the auspicious apodoses *kṣema* (peace) and *varṣa* (rain).

This impressive list of share linguistic characteristics and vocabulary indicates that the three versions in all likelihood had a common source, especially since there is complete overlap of some characteristics or terms along with a sub-

set of shared characteristics or terms in each of the textual pairings.

4 COMMON VERSES

In this section, I have selected verses from the three collections of omens, which best illustrate the commonalities and differences between them. Sometimes the differences point to nuances based on local traditions and customs; but at other times they indicate corruption in transmission. In general, the version from the *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna* has greater affinity to Aṅga 19 than to Aṅga 42, while the two versions from the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* show similarities that point to their common origin.

I. VERSES SHARED BY ALL THREE VERSIONS

A. Crow on the Head

Śkā 36

yasya śīrṣe niṣīditvā karṇaṃ karṣati vāyasaḥ/
abhyantare saptarātrān maraṇaṃ yasya nirdiśet//

If a crow sets down on a man's head and tears away at his ear, it indicates his death within seven nights.

Garga 19.30

yasyābhilīyate mūrdhni vāyasaḥ pathi gacchataḥ/
śastreṇa vā sa vidhyeta manuṣyaḥ pannagena vā//

If a crow clings to the head of a traveller on the path, then he is wounded by either a sword or a snake.

Garga 42.15

nilīya mūrdhani yadā vāyaso yasya bhāṣate/
tadā tasya bhayaṃ vidyāc chastreṇa bhujagena vā//

If a crow, after alighting on the head of a man, calls out, then one should know that he has danger from a sword or a snake.

The protases of all three versions locate the crow on the man's head (*śīrṣa, mūrdhan*); and the apodoses are all inauspicious indicating imminent death (Śkā) or fatal injuries from an attack with a sword or snake bite (Garga).

II. VERSES SHARED BY *ŚĀRDŪLAKARṆĀVADĀNA* AND GARGA 19

A. Alchemy and Gold

Śkā 30

lākṣāharidrāmañjiṣṭhāharitālamanaḥśilāḥ/
yasyāharet puras tasya svarṇalābhaṃ vinirdiśet// 30

[If a crow] fetches lac, turmeric, red Indian madder, yellow orpiment, or red arsenic in front of [a man, then] it indicates his acquisition of gold.

Garga 19.35

lākṣāharidrāmañjiṣṭhāṃ yadi gṛhyopasarpati/
suvarṇalābhaṃ jānīyād vāyasena pracoditam// 35

If a crow picks up lac, turmeric, or red Indian madder [in its beak] and approaches cautiously, then one should know that the crow portends the acquisition of gold.

These two verses point to alchemy with the end product of gold. Common to both protases are lac, turmeric and red Indian madder; and their common apodosis is gold

B. Swooping down

Śkā 19

sārthopari niṣīditvā kṣāmaṃ dīnaṃ ca vyāharet/
nipatet sārthamadhye 'smin caurasainyaṃ na saṃśayaḥ// 19

If, after having settled down [in a tree] above a caravan, [a crow] calls out weakly and miserably [and] swoops down in the midst of the caravan, then, without doubt, there is an army of thieves [at that place].

Garga 19.53

pṛṣṭhato yadi vā sārthe vāmato vā niḍīyate/
saṃgrāmaṃ nirdiśet tatra vāyasena pracoditam//

Or, if [a crow] swoops down on a caravan from behind or from the left, it indicates war at that place as announced by the crow.

The protasis of both omens includes a caravan and the bird's flight pattern of swooping down. The Śkā focusses on the sound of the bird and Garga on its direction. Both apodoses are inauspicious with an underlying military theme: Śkā has an army of thieves, and Garga has war.

C. Nest-building

In this example, it is Śkā that comes to the rescue to provide meaning to a corrupt transmission of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*.

Śkā 50–52

upari vṛkṣaśikhare yadā sūyati vāyasī/
alpodakaṃ vijānīyāt sthale bījāni ropayet// 50

yadā tu madhye vṛkṣasya nilayaṃ karoti vāyasī/
madhyamaṃ varṣate varṣaṃ madhyaśasyaṃ prajāyate// 51

skandhamūle tu vṛkṣasya yadā sūyati vāyasī/
anāvṛṣṭir bhaved ghorā durbhikṣaṃ tatra nirdiśet// 52

When a female crow gives birth on the crown of a tree, one should recognise that [even] little water will cause the seeds in the ground to grow [at that place]. 50

But, when a female crow makes a nest in the middle of a tree, moderate rain will fall and a moderate amount of grain will be produced [at that place]. 51

And, when a female crow procreates at a branch of a tree truck [i.e., near the bottom of the tree], [then] there will be terrible drought that indicates famine at the place. 52

Garga 19.43–44

nīḍāny ucceṣu vṛkṣeṣu yadi kurvanti vāyasāḥ/
*nivṛttāny alpavṛkeṣu taṃ anāvṛṣṭilakṣaṇam//*43
nīcair nīḍāni kurvanti vṛkṣāṇāṃ yadi vāyasāḥ/ 44

If crows make nests high up in trees [or] nests that are not concealed in small trees, it is a sign of drought. 43

If crows make inferior [nests] in the lower parts of trees.... 44

In this example there are definite signs of corruption in Garga's version. Both protases locate the nests in different parts of trees beginning at the top and the

common apodosis for both is drought. In Garga's version, it would appear that the apodosis of 19.43 belongs with 44, with a good chunk of the text missing, and rather than the middle of the tree, it talks about exposed nests in small trees.

D. Numbers of offspring

Śkā 53

> *caturaḥ pañca vā potān yadā sūyati vāyasī/*
> *subhikṣaṃ ca bhavet tatra phalānām uditaṃ bhavet//*
>
> When a female crow generates four or five chicks, then, it is said that there will be an abundance of fruits at that place.

Garga 19.50d–51

> *... triśāyāś caiva vāyasāḥ//50*
> *durbhikṣam anapatyeṣu ekaśāveṣu caiva hi/*
> *tajjāṃśeṣu yadā nīḍaṃ vāyasaḥ kurute kvacit//51*
>
> ...and crows having three chicks indicate famine. In the case of crows that are barren, that have one chick, or when a crow makes its nest anywhere on the corners of houses, [it indicates famine].

Both protases include a specific number of offspring. The Śkā indicates that when the number is large, the outcome is auspicious, while Garga's version expresses it in the opposite way: the lower number indicates an inauspicious outcome. Both use the number of offspring and come to the same result, but the Śkā asserts a positive and Garga a negative outcome. Difference is found merely in the mode of expression.

III. VERSES SHARED GARGA 19 AND GARGA 42

This final section illustrates the similarities between versions of crow omens from the same text; and based on its clarity, suggests that Aṅga 19 postdates Aṅga 42.

A. Bodies of water and rain

Garga 42.29

> *udapāneṣu kūpeṣu sarassu saritāsu ca/*
> *yatrāriṣṭo vadet tuṣṭo varṣaṃ tatrādiśen mahat//*
>
> Where a contented *ariṣṭa*-bird[14] calls out at wells, caves, pools, or rivers, it indicates abundant rain at that place.

14 The word *ariṣṭa* in this context is another name for the crow, the most important omen bird in ancient India.

Garga 19.20

udapāneṣv anūpeṣu sarassu ca saritāsu ca/
vāyasā yadi vāsante varṣam evaṃ vinirdiśet//

If, during the rainy months, crows call out at wells, on the wetlands, at lakes, and rivers, then it indicates rain.

The two protases mention almost the same bodies of water, except 42.29 has pool (*kūpa*) for wetlands (*anūpa*) at 19.20. Although they come from a common source, the specificity of the former and the generality of the latter, indicate the 42.29 is the older, referring to a precise location. Both apodoses are expressed by the same word rain (*varṣa*).

B. Right, left and auspicious and inauspicious results

Garga 42.9–10

dakṣiṇād vāmabhāgād vā nibodheta pṛtha dvijān/
ariṣṭo nāma śakuniḥ prasthitasya yathā bhavet/
vāmato 'rthakaraḥ sa syāt dakṣiṇo 'rthān vināśayet// 9
puraṃ praveśyamānasya grāmaṃ vā yadi vā gṛhaṃ/
dakṣiṇe śobhano 'rthaḥ syād vāmatas tu vigarhitaḥ// 10

One should pay attention to birds individually from either the right or the left side. For him who has set out [on a journey], if the omen-bird, called *ariṣṭa*, is on the left, there is the accomplishment of the objective; but [if it is] on the right side, it causes the objectives to be lost. 9

For him being led into [i.e., re-entering] his town, village, or house, if [the bird] is on the right, the outcome is auspicious; but it is reprehensible, if it is from the left. 10

Garga 19.27–28

prasthitasya yadā samyag vāyaso madhuraṃ vadet/
vāme 'rthasādhano jñeyo dakṣiṇo 'rthān na sādhayet// 27
dakṣiṇas tu nivṛttasya vāyaso 'rthakaro bhavet/
vāme na śasyate hṛṣṭo gṛhaṃ praviśate tathā// 28

When a crow calls out sweetly in the same direction of the traveller, then it is recognised that if it is on the left, there is the attainment of the objectives; if it is on the right, he does not attain his objectives. 27

> Now, a crow on the right of him who has returned indicates the accomplishment of his objective; and he, being glad, enters the home; [if it is] on his left, it is not esteemed. 28

Between these two versions from Garga, 19.27–28 provides the better and a more concise reading of the information than does 42.9–10, which overall is rougher and less clear, reflective of an earlier transmission.

C. Calls and Safe Return

Garga 42.26

> *svāgataṃ cāravaṃ kurvan gṛhadvāri yadā bhavet /*
> *iṣṭaṃ samāgamaṃ brūyāt tadā vā prasthitaiḥ priyaiḥ //*
>
> If [a crow] is at a doorway of a house, crying "welcome" (*svāgata*), it announces the sought-after reunion with the dear ones who have set out (on a march).

Garga 19.15

> *āgataṃ gatam ity etat yadi vāseta vāyasaḥ /*
> *śānto madhuranirghoṣaḥ proṣitāgamanaṃ bhavet //*
>
> If a crow calls this out, "what has gone, has come back" (*āgataṃ gatam*) in peaceful and sweet manner and without cries, then there is the return of him who has set out on a journey.

Both protases quote words of welcome that are expressed in slightly different ways. Verse 19.15 contains the manner in which the welcome is made, and the apodosis expresses that the traveller returns from his journey, while 42.26, only implies that the men have returned home by the expression "welcome" (*svāgata*), which indicates that is the more original.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Although we cannot speak about the entire text of the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa*, we can say that its Aṅgas 19 and 42.9–29 bear significant similarities in both language and content to *Śārdūlakarṇāvadāna*'s "vāyasaruta" to allow us to say with some degree of confidence that these three collections of crow omens most likely derived from a common store of knowledge pertaining to bird watching and divination, which was known and taught in the Northwest of the Indian subcontinent around the beginning of the Common Era, since both texts originate

from the same geographical location at about the same time. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to assume that this tradition of bird divination, like that of the ancient Greeks, Etruscans, and Romans, probably derived originally from Mesopotamia and travelled with merchants and warriors from the Middle East along the Silk Road into the Northwest regions, where their knowledge was recorded in Buddhist literature and incorporated into the Brahmanic knowledge system of astral science.[15]

Although it is impossible at this point to determine which represents the oldest version of crow omens, it is apparent that Aṅga 42 antedates Aṅga 19. Importantly, as work on the *Gārgīyajyotiṣa* proceeds, it will prove useful to take into consideration linguistic features that it has in common with the Prakritic language of Buddhist Sanskrit.

ABBREVIATIONS

Garga Iyengar, R. N., Sudarshan, H. S., and Viswanathan, A. (2019), 'Vṛddhagārgīya Jyotiṣa', *Tattvadīpaḥ: Journal of the Academy of Sanskrit Research, Melkote*, 25/1, 2 & 3: 1–4, 60–95, 26–55, 1–16, ISSN: 2321-7715; pt./ 1: https://www.academia.edu/39541822, pt. 2: https://www.academia.edu/40624384, pt. 3: https://www.academia.edu/42023011.

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